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## **Significant others or burden? The role and place of seniors in contemporary families in Poland**

### **Introduction**

As the term global aging correctly implies, nearly every country in the world is expected to experience some shift toward slower population growth and an older age structure. This does not mean, however, that the world is demographically converging.

In modern societies where you can observe various types of intergenerational solidarity and social help, the elders are not only the recipients but they are also giving. For example, the need for people who could provide care for children increased with the number of working women. Since not every family in the society has sufficient income to send their kids to kindergartens, some grandmothers support younger generations by taking care of their grandchildren. Moreover, it is a fact that some elders support younger generations financially.

Every old individual has a biological past, is shaped by inborn and familial factors, educational and professional experiences as well as emotional life. Family life, with all the support and help it provides, is key to a good and long life. Whether they live with their families or separate, elders have a central place and role in the family as those who bind the past with the present. For elders the family is the major social and psychological support system.

## Graying World

The contemporary demographic analyses indicate *aging* as one of the most important problems both in a social and in sociological perspective. What this means in practice is a significant increase in the percentage of older people in the populations of many modern, particularly high-developed, societies. It should be noted that a universal and commonly accepted definition of the term *old age* does not exist. Different scientific domains consider the issues of aging from diversified perspectives. Despite many different approaches, focused on various problems of the seniors, what is certain is that senility is the final stage of human life. It starts when people reach the *threshold of old age* (this border is most often defined in demographic terms – its example is the notion of *post-working age*, common in Polish statistics). With no doubt, it's tied closely to the dynamic synergetic connections between biological and psychological processes and changes in the social activity of a person (Szatur-Jaworska 2000: 33–34). Old age is also linked directly to decreasing body efficiency, gradual loss of mobility, weakening of the immune forces, limiting the ability in adapting to changes in different planes of social life. Besides, it usually correlates with pauperization, loneliness, need of assistance in everyday life, and even functioning on the margins of society (Trafiałek, 2006: 69).

Social issues caused by the growing number of elderly people (who are struggling with a wide range of life problems), become a very important topic in social politics of high developed societies – especially in the European countries. EUROSTAT data indicate a permanent growth of the percent of elderly people (defined on the basis of age – over 65 years) among citizens of the European Union in the years 1990–2014.

In January 2014 the average participation rate of older people in the population of 27 EU countries was 28.2%, whereas in the beginning 1990 it reaches only 20.6% (<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&plugin=1&language=en&pcode=tsdde510> [downloaded 02.01.2016]).

So without a doubt, it can be stated that *aging* is a challenge for modern societies – both at the macro and micro level of social life. The increasing proportion of seniors in the population causes many different problems, solutions for which are becoming more and more difficult. Very important issues are those concerning meeting the existential needs of the elderly – both in economic as well as in the psychological and social planes of life. On the other hand, many issues are related to the functioning of the whole societies considered as macro-social systems. The first dimension concerns the possibility of fulfilling the postulate of full participation of seniors in the society – it is connected with the necessity of implementation strategies designed to give the elderly a dignified life. The second one is related to the role and place of seniors in the social structure.

The growing number of people in post-working age is nowadays a serious issue, and still growing in importance in the economic functioning of modern societies.

One of the main problems for modern economies is developing an effective formula to ensure economic efficiency in the face of the phenomenon of a simultaneous decrease in the number of people in *working age* and an increase of those, who require support from state institutions.

### Seniors in society

Sociological analysis conducted in historical perspective, focused on changes, leads to a conclusion that an old man's position in the contemporary social structure has been reduced in comparison to that in traditional societies. In tribal and ancient societies the generation of grandparents was considered an important source of knowledge and collective experience. They had strong influence on the social and cultural life of the community. In many of the modern societies we can observe a *cult of efficiency* and *cult of youth* wherein older people are often considered useless, or are even being treated as a burden. The older generation has been made synonymous with stagnation and lack of flexibility. Nowadays, energy, resourcefulness, flexibility, and maximum productivity are valued higher than experience, knowledge, and life wisdom represented by the seniors (Pośluszna 2012: 76; Smereczyńska 2000: 84).

On the other hand, the growing share of older people in the population makes seniors more and more *visible*, and their problems become an important subject of the public debate. This phenomenon is also determined by the growing activity of older people in many areas of social life. It can be noticed that an increasing proportion of elderly people try to keep good psychophysical condition and fitness.

This in turn changed the stereotypical perception of seniors as alienated and maladjusted to the modern technology. Nowadays, older people (most of them) are active participants in the social and political life.

The elderly constitute a growing group of voters who are seeking their representatives in local councils and public institutions (as the Parliament). They are more and more intent on effectively seeking those who will fight for their welfare and interests (nowadays political experts point to the phenomenon of a *graying electorate*) (e.g., Tokaj 2008: 381–388; Błędowski 2008 15–57).

When issues of old age are discussed, one should bear in mind that older people are not a homogeneous category. First of all, biological age should be treated as a factor of diversity. Differentiation of seniors by age is significant

because in the literature with growing frequency we can encounter the classification of not only *the third* but even *the fourth age* (e.g., Szukalski 2013: 33).

Proposals to distinguish the *Third* from the *Fourth Age* in the human life course came to the fore in the 1980s when researchers in the fields of demography, biodemography, gerontology, and sociology recognized that average life expectancy in the Western societies had increased and that the oldest subgroup of the population over age 60 was growing rapidly in absolute numbers (e.g., Pifer and Bronte, 1986). The definition of the subgroups of the elderly population was one attempt to specify factors linked to the heterogeneity of the older population in terms of social participation, mortality, morbidity, and service needs.

Former division into three stages – childhood, adulthood (*working age*) and old age, did not reflect the diversity within the population of seniors. People in advanced age often require constant care. They have problems with activities essential to proper functioning in many planes of life. On the other hand, those who have just crossed the *threshold of old age*, are usually fully independent and can take care of themselves.

The above commented issues point to the conclusion that the problem of aging in contemporary societies is an important and complex one. Although there is a general agreement that the present and future cohorts of older adults can, on average, expect to live longer than the previous generations (e.g., Vaupel et al., 1998), there is much debate about the quality of life that will accompany these additional years. There are two predominant viewpoints in this debate: One prognoses that, for most people, these extra years, in principle, could be characterized by positive life quality. The other viewpoint is more negative. It suggests instead that the extra years of life will be characterized by frailty, impairment, multimorbidity, loss of autonomy, and loss of personal identity. According to this viewpoint, the additional years are not related to a delay of biological decline but rather related to “manufactured survival” (e.g., Olshansky et al., 1998).

In the area of scientific research and in terms of social policy two paradigms of old age interpretation can be found. The first one focuses on the problems of exclusion of older people from social and economic life and their withdrawal from economic activity. It is believed that the forms of activity should be adapted to the capabilities of the person at the last stage of life. A very important question here is how to give seniors the opportunity for a decent existence. The second paradigm emphasizes the importance of the social, political and economic activity in old age. It is assumed that seniors have the opportunity to continue fulfilling professional roles or replacing them with new social roles. Very important issues here are competence and life experience. In both interpretations of old age the attention is drawn to different kinds of questions on life and ways of defining its meaning.

## **The role and place of the seniors in modern families**

Despite the dynamic and multi-dimensional changes taking place in modern societies it appears that the family is still the basic environment of human existence and development at all stages of life. With no doubts the role, place, and tasks assigned to members of each generation are changing dynamically (perhaps especially in the generation of the seniors – grandmothers and grandfathers). In the dimension of the family structure many significant changes can be seen. In the past large (multigenerational) families consisted of three or even four generations, living in common household and engaged in everyday duties were a very popular model. Structures of that kind promoted the importance of the father-patriarch and often consisted of family relatives in the lateral line (unmarried brothers, unmarried sisters). Industrialization and urbanization caused the disintegration of kinship relationships and the phenomenon of a gradual increase of basic (nuclear) family independence (significant reduction in wider family structure influence). Multi-generation family began to fade, on the other hand a small, autonomic family has become the most common pattern of family life. In time the family size has decreased; firstly, due to the reduction in number of children in the families; secondly, due to the disintegration of large family structures. Furthermore, the increased social mobility caused periodic separation of family members. Processes connected with industrialization facilitated the transformation of the family in all its aspects, but the most important result was the crisis of the traditional institution of a family. The necessity of searching for sources of livelihood caused single relatives as well as the whole families to change their place of living. This in turn loosened the ties within the wide community of relatives. The gradually disappearing large families consisting of many persons living together were being replaced by small family structures. This was caused by the latter's high adaptability to a fast-paced reality of a transforming society. Multigenerational family gradually turned into a nuclear family. Some scientist say that in contemporary reality the nuclear family remains a powerful normative ideal in much of the Western world, and the people who do not follow this pattern may be considered deviant, or not even families at all (e.g., Stacey 1996).

The phenomenon of the emancipation of the family has caused increasing strength of the emotional bonds, maintaining personal relationships between generations. Therefore, the modern multi-generation family can be recognized as a modified extended family (the so-called large family circle). It is constituted by union of nuclear families connected by strong social ties and depending on each other (e.g., Kawula 1978). Their members provide mutual assistance and various services which is the main difference between them and the isolated nuclear family. Nevertheless, the nuclear families retain their economic

independence in this wide structure and sometimes live far from one another – it differentiates that kind of family community from the enlarged family in a traditional sense. There is no strict, hierarchical structure of authority, while intense family ties are maintained (e.g., Adamski 2002). The multigenerational family (in traditional sense) in Poland still exist (mainly in the rural areas), although it cannot be considered a common pattern of family structure any more. It can be noticed that their number is constantly decreasing. This is caused by many different factors: increased mobility, easier access to dwellings, changes in the system of values and norms, atomization of the population etc. It is possible that factors such as the aging of the population, financial crises, return toward traditional cultural values, and changes in the preferred models of family life, will reverse the current trends observed in plane of common family lifestyles.

Yet the older family members are not only the recipients of family support, but are also its increasingly important source due to major social and economic shifts including the increased incidence of marriage breakup, women's participation in the labour market and lone parenthood. Grandparental care of young grandchildren, especially in countries with weak provision of public child care services, enables the parents in dual-earning families as well as lone parents to participate in the labour market.

Many of the reports published periodically by OBOP suggest that a current social climate fosters the restoration of multigenerational family structures. The data collected shows a positive image of seniors as a common phenomenon in the Polish society. It seems that the role and importance of seniors is growing amongst the members of the younger generation (it is visible in many dimensions of social life).

The report *Ties in the family* shows that most Poles declare living in close proximity to other family members who live apart. It is an important statement because the geographical distance between relatives affects the opportunities for intergenerational contact and transfers. Greater distance tends to suppress frequency of contact and tends to make support provision more difficult. It can be said that geographic distance between parents and their children is a fundamental determinant of contact between them and proximity determines not just the nature of the contact but also the frequency (Lin and Rogerson, 1995).

Almost three quarters of the respondents (71%) say that their relatives live relatively close – in the same city, municipality or in different locality, but not so far from each other. Surveys indicate very high importance of personal meetings with family members for the Poles. Three quarters of the respondents who still have a parent (75%) meet with them at least once a week. Two-thirds of grandparents (67%) see their grandchildren at least once a week; 64% of parents meet with their adult children who live separately with the same frequency. In addition to these, research conducted by OBOP indicates that personal contacts



with in-laws, own siblings and grandparents are also quite frequent ([www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2013/K\\_107\\_13.PDF](http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2013/K_107_13.PDF)).

The above commented data show just how important family is for the Poles. It is commonly treated as a basic value influencing life choices. Family interactions have priority over other planes of social activity. CBOS data point to the fact that hierarchy of values respected by Poles have remained stable for a long time – invariably family happiness is indicated as the most important goal of human existence. The vast majority of respondents even say that people need a family to feel happiness (85%). Based on survey data, it can be said that people put much attention and commitment into caring for social contacts which integrate the family and make it a coherent community ([www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2013/K\\_033\\_13.PDF](http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2013/K_033_13.PDF)). Attitudes of that kind are caused by the proximity of residence of relatives (which is quite frequent in Poland). Although the phenomenon of reducing the family size and structure can be observed (what is clearly visible is the domination of the nuclear model – nowadays two-generational families constitute basic social systems), the ties with distant relatives and especially with the grandparents, are still of great importance to the Poles.

The most popular model of family life in Poland is a small (nuclear) family, consisting of parents and children. Currently nearly half of Poles – according to their own declaration – live in such family units (45%); one-fifth (21%) live in multigenerational families which include grandparents, parents and children. (Other noticeable patterns of family life are: single households, married couples without children, partners in long-term relationships with a person of the opposite sex, single parenthood, temporary relationships with a person of the opposite sex and others) ([www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2013/K\\_033\\_13.PDF](http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2013/K_033_13.PDF)).

It also turns out that the preferred patterns of family life are consistent with those actually existing. More than half of the respondents (55%) declare that the most appropriate for them is a family constituted by a spouse and children. It should, however, be stressed that nearly one third of the respondents (29%) would like to live in a large extended family ([www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2013/K\\_033\\_13.PDF](http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2013/K_033_13.PDF)). This survey data leads to two basic conclusions. Firstly, despite the dynamic changes taking place in both micro- and macrosocial structures, the system of norms and values identified in the majority of Poles are not undergoing that much of a transformation – throughout the years the family has been one of the most important values (and considered the main determinant of human existence). Secondly, the multigenerational family still exists as an important model of the basic social structure – a significant number of Poles live in households consisting of several generations, and in opinion of a large group of people this kind of a family is the best social environment. These conclusions allow putting forward an assertion on the important role of the seniors in the contemporary family life. It seems to be reasonable to claim that the functioning of the seniors within a broad family structure, linked by



strong social bonds is a benefit for members of all generations. Elder members support their families regarding various duties including: childcare, carrying out physical household duties, supporting the family income arrangements, participating in production activities, regulating human relations within the family, guiding the family in terms of religious and universal matters and being supportive in terms of moral affairs in addition to many others. These conclusions are confirmed by the results of the surveys on the perception of the seniors' role in the family conducted by CBOS. Almost two-fifths of the respondents indicate grandparents as persons who have had a major impact on their views and attitudes to life. This is mainly a result of frequent contacts between the generation of the seniors and of youth in early childhood – more than half of the respondents (51%) say that they had seen their grandparents very often, and every fourth (24%) says that they quite often had the opportunity to meet with them. Just one in eight adult Poles (12%) says that in childhood they rarely met with their grandparents. Only a very small group declares that they did not see (6%) or did not know (7%) their grandparents ([www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2012/K\\_008\\_12.PDF](http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2012/K_008_12.PDF)). In addition to that, it should be noted that the vast majority of the respondents who knew their grandparents, described the relations with them as close (86% and 61% described it as very close). Nearly three quarters of the respondents (72%) feel that they owe something to their grandmother or grandfather. A very large group of the respondents declared that they felt gratitude towards the seniors. Gratitude expressed most often stemmed from the recognition of the role played by the grandparents in their upbringing, the care (65%) and surrounding them with love (64%). More than half of the interviewed say that they owe the knowledge of the history of their family to grandparents (57%), as well as on moral principles (57%) and religious beliefs (54%). Slightly fewer respondents claim that they owe to their grandparents such qualities like dutifulness, diligence, self-discipline and willpower (48%). About two-fifths felt that by contact with their grandparents they gained practical skills (44%), knowledge of certain historical events (43%) and have learned to love the motherland (38%). Every fourth respondent said that grandparents initiated some of their hobbies and passions ([www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2012/K\\_008\\_12.PDF](http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2012/K_008_12.PDF)).

## Conclusions

In modern realities grandparents often take care of their grandchildren, despite the fact that they have strong competition – television and the Internet from which the children learn about life. It seems that grandparents are still sig-

nificant others who play an important role in the transfer of social and cultural values.

Grandparents play an important role in maintaining the identity of the family, building connections between the past, present and future and shaping its own unique history. Their presence during transitions, such as weddings, birth commemorations and funerals provides an anchor of stability and family continuity. Grandparents may act as arbitrators and negotiate between parents and children concerning values and behaviour. They can act as go-betweens in disputes between teenagers and their parents. Older members of families have an important role in keeping wider sets of relatives connected with each other, acting as conveyers of family history, heritage and traditions.

Many older people are very determined not to be a burden for their children. Financial help from the younger to older family members is much less common than support offered to the young by the elderly. Money moves from older parents to their adult children and grandchildren as inheritance, but also between living family members.

For people older family members are guarantors of security, care and acceptance. Family is an institution most often indicated as the only one capable of filling in the vast deficits of the old age and effectively solving problems of various kinds: emotional, psychological, economical and related to the everyday life. While some older people may require additional care and support, others are the ones who actively provide care. Sometimes they take care of their adult children with disabilities. Additionally they provide care for their grandchildren, ranging from casual baby-sitting to full-time care.

Whether they live together or separately; despite the fact that many of their problems stem from familial clashes, negligence and selfishness, the relations between the grandparents and the younger members of the families in Poland seem to be as strong and stable as they were in the past.

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